

JANET FIELDHOUSE MARK AND MEMORY



VIVIEN
ANDERSON
GALLERY



Mark and Memory 3 2014
red raku, black and white charcoal, 50.0 x 32.0 x 11.0 cm

My work is an expression of my Torres Strait Islander heritage: the material culture, rituals of social and religious life, and artefacts which are created to fulfill the functional and spiritual needs of the people of the Torres Strait.

In particular, the practices of Torres Strait Islander women have always been of interest to me. During research for my thesis at the ANU in Canberra, I was looking for all things relating to women and I happened to come across scarification (tattooing).

Scarification (Tattooing) on the head, body and limbs, was considered beautiful, and was central to rituals that young girls went through upon reaching puberty, or a symbol of mourning found only on young women. This ritual was also used on newly married women and a ritual for magic. The markings were documented during Haddon's exploration of the Torres Strait Islands in 1898. I found drawings of women elders with scarification. I also found that the markings meant different things from Island to Island.

The ritual of scarification (tattooing) is no longer practiced today and the history of marking skin was unseen and not heard of in my generation. Instead, current generations use ink tattooing as a means of expressing ones heritage. My idea was to research and produce a body of work to bring back what was unseen marking, so that the next generation will know that scarification was once a strong part of our heritage.

In June 2013 I travelled to my descendant's homeland of Erub (Darnley) Island, located in the eastern part of the Torres Strait to visit family and research their own history of scarification. My trip was interesting, as it was oral history that made me think that the information on women would come from women, however that was not the case. When talking to the Aunty, I was told to talk to Uncle Kapua Gutchen, that he would be able to answers question on scarification.

I asked if there was anyone still alive with the markings, but Uncle said that over time the elders passed. I asked if the Darnley people had markings, Uncle said that yes, we did, and it was markings that showed which clan group you belonged to, for example if my great-great grandmother was alive the scarification marking of a Turtle would be on her right side rump. The image and placement would define the clan group she was from. In addition to that I asked Uncle what tools they would use to make the marking on the skin. Uncle said they used sharp stones, bamboo and kale shell, and for healing, snake oil.

The scarification forms I found are taken from two dimensional drawings and built into three dimensional forms using hand building techniques. Each scarification design has a different meaning, for example mourning, marriage, a symbol of a young girl reaching maturity, and a symbol of magical power.

The porcelain works are concerned with the material culture of the women of the Torres Straits. I have examined the techniques used by women weavers from the Torres Strait Island in the production of mats and fibre baskets, and recreated the process in porcelain. Similarly, I have been inspired by Torres Strait dance and the body adornments – pendants and armbands - worn by the dancers to decorate themselves.

All the porcelain pieces are created by hand, 'woven'. When placed in a kiln the porcelain pieces start doing their dance, transforming in the kiln. Other porcelain pieces are concerned with the ideas of mark and memory: the mark is the way the hand created the forms, the memory is the idea created – a tribute to the women and the life of the Torres Straits.

These works sit at the intersection between contemporary ceramic practice in Australia, and the tradition of art of the Torres Straits.

Janet Fieldhouse, June 2014

MARK AND MEMORY

Born in 1971, and of Torres Strait Island heritage, Janet Fieldhouse has been working as a professional ceramicist for two decades now. Young Janet's life took a significant turn when, in 1990, she enrolled in a three-year visual arts course at the Cairns TAFE College. The then-teenager's decision to major in ceramics studies meant that she came into close contact with Gloria Fletcher, Australia's most celebrated Indigenous ceramic artist and sculptor, known later as Thancoupie or Thanakupi. As Fieldhouse's first and most significant mentor, Thanakupi (1937 – 2011) influenced the direction of the young ceramic artist's professional life.

Following graduation from ceramic studies at the Cairns TAFE College, Janet Fieldhouse moved to Canberra to undertake postgraduate studies at the ANU, again in ceramics. There she met ceramicists and tertiary educators Janet De Boos and Greg Daly, who were to guide Fieldhouse through her university studies in ceramics, thereby strongly influencing her continuing artistic development.

During her ANU years Fieldhouse developed a signature style that she styled 'woven ceramics', involving an ostensibly organic interplay of form, and for which she became widely recognised relatively early in her career. Fieldhouse's 'woven', flexible-porcelain fashioned ceramic works made reference, albeit indirectly, to the traditional weaving practices, basketry, mats and woven armbands of Torres Strait Islander women. These continue to feature in her oeuvre and collectively make a strong contribution to *MARK AND MEMORY: JANET FIELDHOUSE*.

Towards the end of Fieldhouse's ANU days her awakening interest in Torres Strait Islander culture developed into a keener, more sharply focused awareness of the historical precedents provided by her own people's art-making, this time women's body art, as well as other aspects of women's material culture, including traditional hair combs. Used for grooming of self and others, women's haircombs were originally carved from wood (specifically that of the wild plum tree, wongai), or bamboo.

Fieldhouse's growing and continuing fascination with Erub Island women's bodily scarification practices gradually morphed into a desire to incorporate more specific reference to TI artistic and aesthetic practices, specifically those of her women forebears, into her ceramic works. This form of 'translation', from the originally diverse natural media used by Torres Strait Island cultures, into the introduced medium of ceramics, which Fieldhouse had mastered as a young artist, has been underpinned by serious research. These separate but interconnected threads inform the splendid new ceramic work that Fieldhouse has made for this exhibition, *MARK AND MEMORY*, in conjunction with some earlier works. This provides a sense of her oeuvre up to and including the present day.

Concurrent with continuing research into Torres Strait Islander women's weaving and basketry practices, Fieldhouse has more recently turned her artistic and scholarly attention to the now obsolete tradition of Torres Strait Islander women's bodily scarification practices. According to Lindsay Wilson in a Queensland Education Department document,

...The design was incised into the skin with a sharp piece of quartz, shell or bamboo, a specific plant juice was applied to prevent healing, and wet clay was packed into the wound to promote scarring (Wilson, 1988:10).

At first this influence began to reveal itself in her work obliquely, with Fieldhouse's initial incursion into this field taking place about four years ago, when she created a light box and porcelain work through which an under-layer

of markings referencing the body scarification markings (which she preferred to describe as 'tattoos') of TI women glowed seductively. Simply titled *Tattoo*, the work evoked the marks that her ancestral kinswomen, in times gone by, incised permanently into their bodies, visibly transforming their beings. Through this delicate, incandescent porcelain work, Janet Fieldhouse's half-elliptical arcs and motifs radiated, their scintillating, dancing forms visible only when the work was illuminated from within.

A tantalising work, *Tattoo* won Fieldhouse first prize in the Shepparton Museum's annual Indigenous Ceramic Art Award in 2012. Fieldhouse's ceramics are unequivocally contemporary, structured and refined, while at the same time functioning as *memento mori*, a form of homage to her Torres Strait Island women ancestors. *Tattoo* evinced a ceremonial dignity, revealing, palimpsest-like, the long-repressed under-layer of Torres Strait Islander women's cultural pursuits. A radiant work, it seems to materialise and de-materialise before our eyes, as if in constant flux, simultaneously fleeting and permanent, present and absent – akin to the lives of the Ancestors.

Such fusion of the past with the present, of the human body with the hand-made, is also evident in Janet Fieldhouse's most recent work, on display in this exhibition *MARK AND MEMORY: JANET FIELDHOUSE*. To understand this body of work, and its relationship to Torres Strait Islander women's bodily scarification practices, it is necessary to understand the historical context from which it has emerged. Similar designs were also used to decorate TI women's combs, which also figure in Fieldhouse's most recent work.

Erub Island Bodily Scarification Practices: A Brief History

From first contact in July 1871, when the Reverend Samuel McFarlane, accompanied by other members of the London Missionary Society and also a number of previously-converted evangelists from the South Sea Islands, anchored their boat at Erub (Darnley Island), the British missionaries set out to convert the Torres Strait Islanders to Christianity.

Since 1871, an annual holiday commemorating that historic occasion, known as 'The Coming of the Light', has been celebrated by Torres Strait Islanders. As this would suggest, historically, Christianity was readily accepted (on the whole) by the Torres Strait Islanders, although there have been and still are some vocal dissenters.

In precontact days, Torres Strait Islanders, both men and women, regularly practised body scarification, probably using sharpened bones and shells, leaving raised cicatrices of the scar tissue that would form over a wound, later contracting into a smaller, permanent scar. Ink was not used in pre-contact days, so those practices cannot legitimately be described as tattoos, although more recently ink tattoos using traditional TI design elements have become increasingly popular. The most celebrated contemporary exponent of this practice is the former AFL (Adelaide Crows) superstar, Andrew McLeod, who has a large and impressive TI ceremonial headdress tattooed onto his upper right arm, close to his shoulder.

But in the past, the ritual scars were associated with various TI rites of passage, including mortuary ceremonies. In the case of TI women, such scars were quite possibly markers of coming of age associated with important life events, including menstruation and childbirth, but sometimes simply for the purpose of beautification.

A number of Torres Strait Islanders, including the late Billy Missi (1970 – 2012) have attributed the obsolescence of this practice to missionary disapproval and interference.¹ There is evidence however, that despite the disapprobation of the British missionaries who arrived in the Torres Strait in 1871, the practice of scarification actually continued

for some years after contact, and that introduced materials, including sharpened shards of the glass brought by the missionaries, were used for this purpose. Ash et al have written that based on earlier reports, “*Flaked bottle glass has been (and occasionally still is) used in therapeutic bloodletting and in ritual scarification*” [in the Torres Strait] (2008: 355).

In terms of the specific motifs and patterns of these cicatrices, Professor Edward Forbes, a member of the 1852 Cambridge Anthropological exhibition, made the following observation when he and his fellow researchers first disembarked from the H.M.S. Rattlesnake and set foot on the Torres Strait Islands for the first time in 1852:

...The Torres Strait Islanders are distinguished by a large complicated oval scar, only slightly raised, and of neat construction. This, which I have been told has some connection with a turtle, occupies the right shoulder, and is occasionally repeated on the left.

Other archival evidence exists suggesting that there may well have been a range of quasi-figurative cicatrix designs, in all probability expressing local flora, fauna, or sea creatures associated with specific familial groups, as well as more abstractly-patterned cicatrices. Some designs were representational, other motifs were geometric and it seems that others were sometimes purely decorative in nature.

As Haddon, who visited the islands in the early twentieth century, wrote:

...A distinctive form of triangle variant--here identified as a 'Hooked Triangle' --has been recorded in the rock art from three mid-Western islands (Zurath, Badu and Pulu). The design form consists of an infilled triangle with two small curved lines emanating from either side of the tip of the triangle, and has been recorded individually or laterally linked...Variations of the Hooked Triangle are common on decorated objects. The design form is recorded as an engraving on the upper jaw of warup drums--a popular collectors' item--obtained from several Torres Strait islands including Saibai, Tudu, Nagi, Muralag, and on gama drums collected from Mer, and from Kiwai island (e.g. Haddon 1912). The Hooked Triangle has also been recorded on bamboo tobacco pipes collected from Mer and Kiwai island, and wooden combs collected from Kiwai island. The distinctive Hooked Triangle design is also featured on a pottery sherd collected from Kalumpang in Sulawesi (Indonesia) in 1951 (Glover 1986: 74). This similarity represents one of the first direct indirect artistic links beyond the Torres Strait region and into Southeast Asia. In addition to portable material culture objects, a variation of the Hooked Triangle was recorded by Haddon as a scarification design on a girl from Mer. This design expression--identified as a kip sor koima, back koima, or kip user is located on a girl's back and is considered a sign of mourning (Haddon 1912: 22).

Haddon concluded that:

...Consequently, there exists a broad-scale distribution of the Hooked Triangle design form across the Torres Strait region and beyond, and across a range of media. Although the form of the Hooked Triangle in Torres Strait rock art is relatively consistent (red infilled triangle with two curved lines), its appearance on both portable material culture objects and people reveals a much more varied and elaborate appearance.

The preceding descriptions almost certainly indicate that people ‘wearing’ specific designs on their bodies or reproducing them on other media, for example on combs, were closely affiliated with a particular familial group, ancestral being or provided visible evidence of a significant event – for example, marking puberty or childbirth, the death of a parent or partner, or other important milestones in life.

Some of these shapes and geometric shapes have found their way, albeit indirectly, into Fieldhouse’s works in this exhibition, notably in the *Mark and Memory* and *Bride Pendant* series.

Janet Fieldhouse, Contemporary Erub Ceramic Artist

Fieldhouse’s fascination with and research into the women’s scarification practices and designs, and her delvings into other expressions of TI women’s material culture, accompanied by her critically-important discussions with older family members, have driven her most recent artistic experimentation. Beginning by referencing women’s basketry, mat and armband weavings rendered in flexible porcelain, then carving onto and into surfaces in an attempt to simulate the raised patterns of bodily scarification that TI women practised to mark rites of passage, important life events, possibly including marriage, childbirth, and mortuary ceremonies, Fieldhouse has extended her research into her cultural past. The series titled ‘Skin Secrets’, also part of *MARK AND MEMORY*, with their mysterious connotations, conjure up a past that lives on in limbo, as if deciding whether or not to give up its secrets to the living.

Fieldhouse has embarked on a pathway that involves not only discovering more about her life narrative as it is framed within an historical context, but a way of celebrating that identity through engaging in the activity that she most loves: making beautiful ceramic works ranging from illuminated porcelain, wooden-ceramic combs, and seemingly divinely inspired red and white raku pendants from which cassowary feathers, beads, shells and string seem to sprout organically.

Equally, *Mark and Memory*, 1-6, Janet Fieldhouse’s delicious, quasi-humanoid red raku sculptural forms evoking abstracted, sturdy, red-ochre decorated torsos (or other highly abstracted body parts) of youthful dancing women, adorned with black and white ceremonial markings, and which refer indirectly to woven skirts fashioned from feathers and other textiles, bring to mind significant ceremonial occasions.

Janet Fieldhouse’s works in *MARK AND MEMORY* provide an overview of her oeuvre to date, while seamlessly linking ceramics with charcoal and textiles, and the past with the present. These remarkable artworks are seemingly part-human, part-earth, and part-spirit.

Conclusions

Sociologist Chris Shilling has conceptualised the human body as an ‘unfinished’ biological phenomenon that is taken up and transformed as a result of social participation. As Susan Holtham writes:

What seems evident is that in traditional societies, ritual body modification practices connect people and their bodies to the reproduction of long established social positions whereas in the industrialised West body piercing seems to serve the function of individuating the self from society.

The ruptures caused by the seismic shock of colonisation often appear to be irreversible, so that the future can seem bleak and depressing, with once closely-connected people now atomised and scattered.

But when one considers the ceramic works of Janet Fieldhouse, which collectively comprise a conceptual and material form of autobiography connecting her with Erub Islanders, past and present, it becomes that the arts have the capacity not only to reconnect people but also to heal.

MARK AND MEMORY: JANET FIELDHOUSE shows that the past continues to express itself in unexpected ways in the present, and will go on doing so in the future. Fieldhouse's new works don't merely serve the function of 'individuating the self from the society' but rather, that of reconnecting the people and their present-day bodies and selves with the past.

But crucially, Fieldhouse accomplishes this feat without sacrificing aesthetic quality, combining respect for the past with a subtle delicacy and contemplative sensibility, underpinned by first-class workmanship. These are the qualities emanating from these beautiful works.

Christine Nicholls, 2014

¹ See, for example, Kris, John Koshie, Billy Missi, web.education.unimelb.edu.au/UNESCO/pdfs/billy-missi.pdf.

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Haddon, A.C., 1912b., 'Domestic utensils and tools', Pp. 120-129. In Haddon, A.C. (ed.) *Reports of the Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to Torres Straits: arts and crafts. Vol. 4.* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge).

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Kris, John Koshie (Chairman, Torres Strait Regional Authority), n.d., *Billy Missi: Billy Missi*, web.education.unimelb.edu.au/UNESCO/pdfs/billy-missi.pdf; UNESCO Observatory, Multi-Disciplinary Research in the Arts, accessed August 10th 2013.

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Shilling, Chris, 1993, *The Body and Social Theory*, Sage Publishers, London.

Wilson, Lindsay, 1988, *Thathilgaw Emeret Lu: A Handbook of Traditional Torres Strait Islands Material Culture*, Department of Education, Queensland.



Mark and Memory 1 2014
red raku, white charcoal, 64.0 x 27.0 x 27.0 cm



Mark and Memory 5 2014
red raku, string, cassowary feathers, 46.0 x 26.0 x 20.0 cm



Mark and Memory 2 2014
red raku, string, cassowary feathers, 55.0 x 28.0 x 14.0 cm



Mark and Memory 4 2014
red raku, string, cassowary feathers, white charcoal, 28.0 x 31.0 x 13.0 cm



Mark and Memory 6 2014
red raku, 30.0 x 40.0 x 20.0 cm



Bride Pendant Series 3 2014
white raku, shells, string, cassowary feathers, beads, 70.0 x 70.0 cm



Bride Pendant Series 4 2014
white raku, shells, string, cassowary feathers, beads, 55.0 x 32.0 cm



Arm Bands Series 2 2014
porcelain, 14.0 x 20.0 x 15.0 cm



Arm Bands Series 3 2014
porcelain, 12.0 x 26.0 x 27.0 cm



Arm Bands Series 1 2014
porcelain, 14.0 x 32.0 x 15.0 cm



Memory Series 1 2014
porcelain, 30.0 x 20.0 x 29.0 cm



Mat Series 2 2014
porcelain. white raku, 20.0 x 16.0 x 10.0 cm



Baskets 2014
porcelain, 10.0 x 28.0 x 18.0 cm

JANET FIELDHOUSE

born 1971, Cairns, QLD
lives and works Cairns QLD

EXHIBITION HISTORY

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2014 *Mark and Memory*, Vivien Anderson Gallery in partnership with Cairns Regional Gallery, Cairns QLD
- 2011 *Journey*, Vivien Anderson Gallery, Melbourne VIC
- 2009 *Woven*, Vivien Anderson Gallery, Melbourne VIC
- 2005 *Unseen*, ADFA, Canberra ACT

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2014 *Indigenous Ceramic Art Award*, Shepparton Art Museum, Shepparton VIC
- The Women's Show*, Vivien Anderson Gallery, Melbourne VIC
- 2013 *The Women's Show*, Vivien Anderson Gallery, Melbourne VIC
- 2012 *Earthworks: Contemporary Indigenous Ceramic Art*, Flinders University City Gallery, Adelaide SA
- Highlights from the 2011 Indigenous Ceramic Art Award*, Flinders University City Gallery, Adelaide SA
- Vivien Anderson Gallery at Cairns Indigenous Art Fair*, Cairns Cruise Liner Terminal, Cairns QLD
- Indigenous Ceramic Art Award*, Shepparton Art Museum, Shepparton VIC
- 2011 *Cairns Indigenous Art Fair*, Cairns Regional Gallery, Cairns QLD
- Vivien Anderson Gallery at Cairns Indigenous Art Fair*, Cairns Cruise Liner Terminal, Cairns QLD
- Land Sea and Sky: Contemporary Art of the Torres Strait Islands*, Gallery of Modern Art/ Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane QLD
- 2010 *Inaugural exhibition, New Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander art galleries*, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra ACT
- Ceramics Now?* Whitehorse Arts Space, Melbourne VIC
- The Women's Show*, Vivien Anderson Gallery, Melbourne VIC

- 2009 *Vivien Anderson Gallery at Cairns Indigenous Art Fair*, Tanks Art Centre, Cairns QLD
- Fire Cloud - Contemporary Ceramics*, Kick Arts Contemporary Arts, Cairns QLD
- Indigenous Ceramic Art Award*, Shepparton Art Gallery, Shepparton VIC
- Contemporary Primitive*, Bega Valley Regional Gallery, Bega NSW
- Graduate Exhibition*, Australian National University School of Art, Canberra ACT
- 2007 *Indigenous Ceramic Art Award*, Shepparton Art Gallery, Shepparton VIC
- 2006 *Through Here*, Indigenous Alumni at the Australian National University School of Art Gallery, Canberra ACT
- Forefront exhibition*, Metro Arts, Brisbane QLD
- 2005 *EASS Award*, Canberra Potters' Society Inc., Watson Arts Centre, Canberra ACT
- 2003 *A survey of Australian Indigenous Ceramic*, Ceramic Art Gallery, Sydney NSW
- A survey of Australian Indigenous Ceramic*, Cowra Art Gallery, NSW
- Annual Members Exhibition*, Canberra Potters' Society Inc., Watson Arts Centre, Canberra ACT
- 2000 *A Place Far Away*, Kingsford Smith Suite, Sydney International Airport, Sydney NSW
- Thuringowa Annual Indigenous Art Exhibition*, Thuringowa, Townsville QLD

AWARDS AND GRANTS

- 2012 Indigenous Ceramic Art Award - First Prize, Shepparton Art Museum, Shepparton VIC
- Arts Queensland Backing Indigenous Arts Development and Presentation Grant "Tattoos"
- 2009 Indigenous Ceramic Art Award - Third Prize, Shepparton Art Gallery, Shepparton VIC
- 2008 Arts Queensland Backing Indigenous Arts Grant "Woven"
- 2007 Indigenous Ceramic Art Award - First Prize, Shepparton Art Gallery, Shepparton VIC
- 2004 Ceramic Art and Perception and Ceramic Technical Award, Australian National University School of Art Emerging Artist Support Scheme

COLLECTIONS

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra ACT
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne VIC
Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane QLD
Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth WA
Parliament House Art Collection, Canberra ACT
University of Queensland Art Collection, Brisbane QLD
Arts Queensland, Brisbane QLD
Shepparton Art Museum, Shepparton VIC

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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- O'Riordan, M. 2009, 'Emerging Artists: Janet Fieldhouse' in *Art Monthly Australia*, The Big Sound Issue no. 225, November, p. 59
- KickArts Contemporary Arts 2009, *Fire cloud: Mollie Bosworth, Janet Fieldhouse, Cathy Keys, Shireen Talibudeen, Peter Thompson, Jenny Valmadre, Robyn Whyte* (exh. cat.), KickArts Contemporary Arts, Cairns QLD
- Nicholls, C. 2012, *Earthworks: Contemporary Indigenous Ceramic Art*, Flinders University City Gallery, Adelaide SA, pp. 44 - 45
- Queensland Art Gallery 2011, *The Torres Strait Islands*, Queensland Art Gallery/ Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane QLD, pp. 29 - 30, 105 - 113.
- Shepparton Art Museum 2012, *Indigenous Ceramic Art Award* (exh. cat.), Shepparton Art Museum, Shepparton VIC
- Shepparton Art Gallery 2009, *Indigenous Ceramic Art Award* (exh. cat.), Shepparton Art Gallery, Shepparton VIC
- Shepparton Art Gallery 2007, *Indigenous Ceramic Art Award* (exh. cat.), Shepparton Art Gallery, Shepparton VIC



Tattoo 2011
porcelain with light box, 30.0 x 30.0 x 10.0 cm
Collection: Shepparton Art Museum, 2012
acquired through the 2011 Indigenous Ceramic Art Award,
Winner - First Prize

JANET FIELDHOUSE
MARK AND MEMORY

11 JULY - 24 AUGUST 2014

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